

# The 'R-word' is no joke!



*For the intellectually disabled and their families, it's just as bad as the "N"-word.*

By Maria Shriver

This has been a year filled with teachable political moments. Racism, sexism, ageism and "change" have been debated at kitchen tables and water coolers across America. But this last week, those gathered around my kitchen table have been consumed with another discussion, one that is not Democratic or Republican -- it's the "R-word" debate.

The "R-word" stands for "retard." For the 6 million to 8 million Americans with intellectual disabilities and their families, this word and its hurtful use is equal to the impact of the "N-word" on an African American.

The reason it's kitchen-table fodder is because of the Dreamworks film "Tropic Thunder," which topped the box-office charts when it opened last weekend and which will attract many more moviegoers this weekend. In the R-rated film, which I've seen, a character named Simple Jack is a caricature of a person with a developmental disability. In one of the scenes, the character played by Robert Downey Jr. chastises Ben Stiller's character for "going full retard," and the "R-word" is repeated many times.

As a journalist, I respect the right to freedom of speech, and my kids will tell you I laugh the loudest when we see a comedy. But as the niece of someone who had a developmental disability, and as a member of the board of directors of Special Olympics International, I know how hurtful the "R-word" is to someone with a disability. I know why "Tropic Thunder's" opening was met by protests on behalf of the intellectually disabled.

Listen to actor Eddie Barbanell, who serves on the Special Olympics board with me, and he will tell you in very emotional terms how the use of that word has made him feel rejected, stupid, demeaned.

Or you can talk to Special Olympics athlete Loretta Claiborne, who speaks on behalf of millions when she describes how the "R-word" has been used to mock and degrade her. She asks all of us to stop using this word without regard to its effect on the hearts and minds of people with disabilities.

There is an old saying: "Sticks and stones will break my bones but names will never hurt me." Even when I chanted it as a child, I never believed it. Words do hurt -- they break people's spirits, they break people's dreams, they break people's hearts.

Kids will see "Tropic Thunder," no matter the rating, and when they leave the theater and go out to their schools, their homes and their communities, they'll call each other the "R-word" because they think it's funny. They'll do it without any idea or regard to how it makes a person with a disability feel.

Too many in the intellectually disabled movement cannot speak out for themselves. It is up to their families and those of us who advocate on their behalf to explain that calling someone by the "R-word" is no longer acceptable and is anything but funny.

It's not acceptable in a movie theater; it's not acceptable on a playground. It's not acceptable that college coaches use it to chastise athletes. It's not OK to use it in a classroom or a boardroom.

"Tropic Thunder" is giving Claiborne, Barbanell and many other individuals and organizations that serve those with special needs -- the Special Olympics, the National Down Syndrome Society, the Arc, the American Assn. of People with Disabilities, Parent to Parent-USA -- a teachable moment. They are ready to join with the entertainment industry to change minds. Dreamworks' decision to include a public service announcement with DVDs of "Tropic Thunder" is an important first step, but far more needs to be done.



Just as important, parents must talk to kids at our kitchen tables about how we have felt when someone called us stupid, idiotic or lame. Because once we put ourselves in someone else's shoes, certain names just aren't that funny any more.

I often quote the Hopi prayer that tells us not to look outside ourselves for a leader. It tells us that we are the ones we have been waiting for. We can exchange one "R-word" for another: respect. We can teach our children that name-calling hurts.

Let's make the "R-word" as unacceptable as the "N-word." Think of all we can accomplish if we work together. It's one thing in this political season that shouldn't require a water-cooler debate.



*Maria Shriver is the first lady of California.*

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**<http://www.r-word.org/>**

Special Olympics, The Arc of the United States, the American Association of Persons With Disabilities and [a large group of supporting organizations](#) have taken the lead in promoting acceptance of people with intellectual disabilities and persuading people to take a pledge not to use the r-word.

This information was compiled by MHRH staff Sue Babin.